

## 23 What Does the Bible Say About Women and Men?<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Women and Men In the First Testament

We may begin with the opening chapters of scripture, because sexuality is an important theme in both creation stories. This is rather striking. One would hardly have expected either a religious text or an account of the origins of the world to have been so interested so soon in the significance of humanity's male- and femaleness.

Genesis 1 comes to its first climax with the creation of a God-like humanity (its second climax is God's ceasing work). The verses are allusive over wherein the God-likeness consists.<sup>2</sup> (Indeed, much is allusive in Gen 1 - 3, not least over matters to do with sexuality, and we have tended to build too much doctrine and ethics on these chapters too easily and need to be a bit more reticent in our handling of them.) There is no suggestion that humanity's God-likeness consists in its reasoning power or spiritual nature. Insofar as the context offers any guidance, it consists in (or perhaps rather implies) humanity's being put in control of other creatures (1:26) and in its being created male and female (1:27); only this second gloss on "God-likeness" is mentioned when the formula reappears later (5:1-2). Humanity is present only in this combination of male and female, and thus the God-likeness of humanity is present only in the combination. In this context, '*adam*' does not refer to the male; it is a word like "mankind" or "humanity" or *homo sapiens*. It is then further defined as "male and female." There is about humanity both a unity and a plurality, both a unity and a diversity. Genesis 1 thus immediately subverts the suggestion that the male is the "natural" human being, the female being a deviant type. Only man and woman together make real humanity. Together they hear God's word, receiving God's blessing and commission to multiply as families, to exercise power in the world, and to enjoy its produce. Genesis indicates no differentiation of role in the fulfillment of this commission, nor any internal hierarchy within humanity.

Not least in light of Gen 1, Gen 2 may be read in a similar egalitarian way. Here, too, God forms "a human being": '*adam* again, but not a

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 1 and 3 first published as "The Bible and Sexuality" in *SJT* 39 (1986): 175-88; section 2 not previously published. As well as sources referred to in the notes, I am aware of having used A. Berlin, "Characterisation in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," *JSOT* 23 (1982): 69-85; P. A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them," *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 129-59; A. Brenner, *The Israelite Woman* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985); P. D. Hanson, "Masculine Metaphors for God and Sex-Discrimination in the Old Testament," *EcR* 4 (1975): 316-24 = Hanson, *The Diversity of Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), pp. 136-47; J. H. Otwell, *And Sarah Laughed* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); W. E. Phipps, "Adam's Rib," *ThT* 33 (1976-77): 263-73; T. R. Preston, "The Heroism of Saul," *JSOT* 24 (1982): 27-46; K. D. Sakenfeld, "The Bible and Women: Bane or Blessing?" *ThT* 32 (1975-76): 222-33; A. Tilby, "How the Virgin Birth Attracts Hostility," *The [London] Times*, 28 November 1981; J. G. Williams, *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> See further the introduction to chapter 4 above.

collective, and the context here stresses the link between '*adam*' and the '*adamah* from which it was made.<sup>3</sup> In the first part of the story, effectively the creature is sexually undifferentiated. When differentiation appears, a divine awareness of the being's incompleteness appears with it. God thus forms another human being as a companion for the first, one who stands over against the first. KJV's "help meet for him" has misled people. "Helper" does not suggest a subordinate; God himself is often people's "helper" in the First Testament. The image of the Holy Spirit as the one who comes alongside to be our helper and companion (John 14) may contribute to our getting the right impression in Gen 2.

The identity of being that is shared by these two people is expressed by the picture of one of them being built up from a part of the other. Their equality may also be suggested by the part being a rib: the woman is not made from man's head, to rule him, or from his feet, to be treated as his servant, but from his side, to stand alongside him "in a partnership of love."<sup>4</sup> It is when she stands alongside him that the man becomes aware of himself as a man, in the company of a woman (*'ish, 'ishshah*). He addresses her as a person over against himself (he does not name her, as if he were in control of her, in the way he did the animals). The aloneness of the sole human being need not imply loneliness, but it does imply that he faces a monumental task on his own, and a task that a man cannot accomplish, because he cannot bear children. His aloneness is overcome through the gift of another in whom he recognizes identity, yet also the differentiation of sexuality, which is a means of their communion and their procreating.

The idyll is soon spoiled. It is not explicit in the story that cynicism and disobedience gain access to human experience through some distinctive female weakness. The weakness of the male, so strangely silent even though apparently present through the exchanges between serpent and Eve, is as clear as that of the female. The story does not indicate why it was the woman that the serpent approached. (I shall hint at a religio-historical understanding of this element in the story when we consider women in Proverbs.) The woman fails by her words, the man by his silence, and both by their deeds.

Consequences follow in the area of sexuality, as in other areas. Whereas in Gen 1 there is no suggestion that man and woman are responsible respectively for home and family, world and work, is it significant that these realms are now assumed to be divided between the sexes (3:16-19)? Certainly both realms are spoiled. But the pain of motherhood (3:16) is more likely the *inner* pain of parenthood, of watching your sons kill each other, for instance (Gen 4:8), rather than merely the physical pain of giving birth; elsewhere, the word has a reference of this kind, and it fits the context. It is a pain Adam will also feel, though Genesis is explicit that he feels it in relation to this work (3:17). As a result of turning from God's way the couple become aware of their nakedness (3:7; this has usually been taken to indicate a negative awareness of their sexuality, though it may rather denote an awareness of their weakness and indigence. Less disputably, it is as a result of this turning that a hierarchical

<sup>3</sup> Hence Phyllis Trible, on whom much of this section depends, translates "earth-creature": see *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Lombard, *Sentences* II, 18/2.

relationship between a man and his wife comes into being. "To love and to cherish" becomes "to desire and to dominate" (3:16).<sup>5</sup>

What next shall I say? For time will fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, Samuel, and various other interesting males, let alone Jephthah's daughter.<sup>6</sup> I will say something about Samson, the other figure who receives only bare mention in Heb 11.<sup>7</sup> He illustrates well how "to love and to cherish" is turned into "to desire and to dominate." His story focuses on desire and domination, woman and violence. He is the First Testament's most macho "hero," the Bible's James Bond.

Yet the comparison is superficial. James Bond is usually the successful ladies' man. If hearts are broken, it will not usually be his. He rides off into the sunset with a sequence of attractive girls.

Four women feature in Samson's story. The first is his mother, one of those archetypal Israelite women who for years tried and hoped and prayed in vain for a child, then bore one in fulfillment of God's promise, a son out of whose eyes the sun shone (his name "Samson" resembles the word for "sun"). The picture of this woman and her husband (Judg 13) contrasts sadly with those of the woman he marries because he fancies her (Judg 14 - 15) and of the woman he picks up to spend a night with because he feels like it (Judg 16:1-3). Then there is the woman he falls in love with. It is a tale of unrequited love. Delilah is interested only in being the woman who can find out for the Philistines the secret of Samson's strength, for thirty silver pieces. The Philistines are able to seize him, gouge out his eyes, and take him back as a trophy to Gaza. There, bound in bronze chains, he grinds at the mill in the prison (Judg 16:4-20).

Samson is a tragic hero because of the contrast between his actual life and his divine calling. He was destined to use the strength of his manliness to deliver God's people from their enemies, but he did not know how to be a real man either with that strength or in his relationships with women, which were directly his downfall.

Inside most of us there is a little James Bond, a little Samson (or a little Delilah?); the James Bond film appeals to those fantasies. The Bible's James Bond, however, lives in the real world, where sex and violence rebound on you. It insists that we live in this real world, not in a celluloid one, a real world in which, because there is something of Samson and Delilah inside us, something of their tragedy also inevitably appears in our lives. We make a mess of what we do with our maleness and our femaleness, as many other films outside the Bond genre recognize. What the Bible adds is that making a mess of your life, your relationships, and your calling need not be the end of the story. Samson's failures cannot be undone, but eyeless in Gaza he prays, and his manly strength knows one final, terribly fruitful moment of violence (Judg 16:30).

Samson appears once more in Scripture, in that list of the heroes of faith in Heb 11. Even Samson is there, among the cloud of witnesses. If there is room for him, there is room for anyone else who makes a mess of being a man (or of being a woman).

<sup>5</sup> D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: IVP, 1967), on the passage.

<sup>6</sup> Phyllis Trible considers her in *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), along with some other women not mentioned in Heb 11.

<sup>7</sup> See J. L. Crenshaw, *Samson* (London: SPCK, 1979).

The First Testament's next, and greatest, study in maleness is David.<sup>8</sup> Violence and sex are prominent in his story, too. Each of the first four chapters in which he appears (1 Sam 16 – 19) emphasizes his significance as a warrior. Saul kills in thousands, David in ten thousands. David has sex with many women, but is never said to love one. The only relationship about which he expresses any feelings is that with Jonathan, and it is only after Jonathan dies that he clearly does that, in his moving lament at the deaths of Jonathan and his father (2 Sam 1). The story of David and Jonathan emphasizes Jonathan's love for David, which prevented Jonathan's competing with David for his father's throne. One does not have to be too cynical to see the preserving of David's lament as designed to indicate that he is not rejoicing in the death of the king and the person whom many Israelites would view as heir to the throne. The political significance of David's relationships with women is even clearer (e.g., 1 Sam 18:26; 2 Sam 3:12-16). Ironically, however, it is through letting a Samson-like fancy for a woman get the better of him that he sows the seeds of destruction for his regime as well as for his family life (2 Sam 11). His handling of his family in succeeding years consistently betrays a weakness that contrasts with the decisiveness he manifests in affairs of state and inevitably carries implications for the latter; he loves those who hate him and hates those who love him (2 Sam 19:6). The end result of all this is the mirroring of the sexual feebleness of his last days and the political feebleness that still cannot grasp the nettle with regard to designating his successor.

We are taken much further inside the character of the man himself than we are in the case of Samson, though in the end this leaves his character a deeper enigma. Sometimes he seems to be the man who walks in God's way, seeking God's guidance, honoring those who deserve honor, making merry before Yahweh no matter who is watching (2 Sam 2:1-7; 6:1-19); and he is the man Yahweh loves and blesses (5:10, 12; 7:1-16). He can equally be portrayed as the man with the knack of falling on his feet as rivals to the throne one by one disappear from the reckoning, and the man with an eye for the main chance (e.g., 3:13-14; 9:1-13?). Rarely are his motives stated, even (indeed notably) in the Bathsheba story and its unpleasant aftermath, so that the narrative leaves us with a deep ambiguity over his character.<sup>9</sup>

Between the stories of Samson and of David, in the order in the English Bible, there appear Ruth and Hannah, whose stories manifest a different form of ambiguity. Elsewhere in the First Testament, a number of Israelite women make their mark in political and military roles (Deborah, Jael, Esther), though without moving quite outside female frameworks

<sup>8</sup> See R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), pp. 114-30; K. R. R. Gros Louis, "The Difficulty of Ruling Well: King David of Israel," *Semeia* 8 (1977): 15-33, reprinted in Gros Louis (ed.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982); D. M. Gunn, *The Story of King David* (Sheffield, JSOT, 1978).

<sup>9</sup> See P. D. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); L. G. Perdue, "'Is There Anyone Left of the House of Saul...?': Ambiguity and the Characterization of David in the Succession Narrative., *JSOT* 30 (1984): 67-84.

(Deborah is “a mother in Israel,” Jael uses her role as hostess, Esther hers as consort). Ruth and Hannah’s stories stay well within those frameworks.

Both stories assume a patriarchal structuring of society. Ruth begins with Elimelech in charge of Naomi and with their sons “taking wives” (1:1-4). When all three women are widowed, Naomi assumes that Ruth and Orpah have no alternative but to find security in the house of a husband (1:9), while Naomi’s own future – and, in the end, Ruth’s, when she insists on accompanying Naomi – will depend upon a male guardian figure or “restorer” (*go’el*; EVV kinsman/redeemer) fulfilling his moral obligations (2:1; 3:1-2). When the restorer, Boaz, meets Ruth, he asks who (that is, which man) she belongs to (2:5). When Naomi sends Ruth to court him, she assumes that the man will tell Ruth what to do (3:4). When the legal position turns out to be more complicated than we thought, the destiny of the two women has to be determined by two male parties in the presence of ten of the city’s male elders (4:1-12). When agreement is reached, it involves the man buying the woman in order to preserve the name of another man (4:10). When the story ends, it is with a list of the male line to which Ruth’s son belongs (4:17-22).

Hannah’s life, in turn, is substantially shaped and given its significance by the stereotypes of a patriarchal society (see 1 Sam 1 - 2). She, too, is presented to us as a man’s wife, under his lordship, an appendage to him. She has to share even that “status” with someone else, and bear the hurt that follows from this. Her significance or worth is determined first by her not having and then by her having a child (rather, a son). While Hannah’s story does work within these stereotypes, it also works against them. Hannah is a woman open with her emotions, direct in her words, forthright with her husband, bold in her promises, courageous in her acceptance of Yahweh’s promise, and vindicated in her trust in Yahweh. She seems to have found a form of freedom within stereotypes that were hallowed by nothing but tradition, but which she could hardly demolish.

In Ruth, a questioning of customary attitudes is first hinted by Ruth’s “clinging” to Naomi and her plea not to be forced to “leave” her: they are the expressions used of the man and woman in Gen 2:24. Back in Bethlehem, the two women begin with initiative and move on to manipulating if not propositioning Boaz; despite the talk of Boaz telling Ruth what to do, actually it is the other way round (Ruth 3:7-9; what exactly Ruth did and what she invited is left allusive). When Boaz marries Ruth, the Bethlehem women see their child not as Elimelech’s, and certainly not as the child of Boaz and Ruth (I remember reflecting when we got married that it did not really seem to be our occasion but our parents’, and for Ruth and Boaz even the birth of their baby was not their own); “a son has been born to *Naomi*,” they declare. Naomi, Ruth and the Bethlehem women bear their own burdens and work out their own salvation in a man’s world; “they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture.”<sup>10</sup>

There are, then, a number of First Testament stories that imply reflection, or at least stimulate reflection, on what it means to be a man and what it means to be a woman. Once we leave Gen 1 - 3, however, there seems to be little in these stories that looks on the two together in

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<sup>10</sup> Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp. 166, 198.

relationship to each other. We do find such reflection, offered or encouraged, in Proverbs and the Song of Songs.

It is one of the major themes of the collected aphorisms that dominate Prov 10 – 31, and one of the two topics that dominate the sermons in doggerel verse that occupy the bulk of Prov 1 – 9. By nature, Proverbs does not systematize its reflection; it characteristically offers the reader individually-encapsulated insights. These often look unbalanced in isolation; if one takes particular aphorisms such as the cartoons of the nagging wife out of the context of the rest of the book, Proverbs seems narrow and chauvinistic. Illuminating insights on what makes a marriage work emerge from bringing together the varied material in Proverbs on male and female roles and temptations, and allowing the aphorisms and sermons to confront each other.

To a man, Proverbs says, “Love, don’t wander.” Keep alive a vision for a relationship that remains full of joyful delight, of enthusiastic affection, even when it is decades old (5:18-19). The will, not just autonomic feelings, is assumed to be involved. You commit yourself to loving her, to focusing on what attracts you to her rather than on what annoys you (cf. 10:12). Loving her must be wary of setting itself to changing her, though love does have a nurturing, transforming effect. It also nurtures the relationship itself, because of the loving response it draws from its object. The converse point is that marital unfaithfulness is both wrong and stupid (5:16-17, 20; 6:28-29). Proverbs 1 – 9 lays great emphasis on this point, probably because it sees a parallel between how husbands and wives relate and how God and Israel relate: marital faithfulness is a parable of religious faithfulness. This metaphor may have been further encouraged by the role that women ministers played in contemporary religions. The women that Proverbs warns men against are at one level these female religious functionaries. And this may be the reason the creation story pictures sin entering the garden through the *woman* yielding to the blandishments of the serpent, a fertility-cult symbol.

The twofold exhortation to men, “Love, don’t wander,” the positive with its negative corollary, may be paralleled by a twofold exhortation to women, “Do, don’t nag.” When a woman nags (19:13; 21:9, 19; cf. 15:17; 17:1), her complaints overtly concern peccadilloes, shortcomings that look trivial yet that she is unable to ignore. If he loved her, she might be able to ignore them; it is one of the senses in which love hides a multitude of faults (10:12). A woman who is loved is unlikely to nag. But a woman who nags is not loved; it is a vicious circle.

A woman’s nagging may also be a displaced way of giving expression to a general dissatisfaction with her lot in life. Here the positive exhortation is important. “Do [that is, achieve], don’t nag.” Proverbs closes with a sometimes-derided portrait of an achieving woman (31:10-31). Home is still assumed to be the arena of what she does (though a man’s work in that culture would also be more home-based than is the case in ours). But she is clearly a woman who is achieving, and who is expected and trusted by her husband to achieve. This woman is surely less likely to be a nag.

Even when it is being positive, Proverbs is predominantly problem-centred in its treatment of sex, as of other topics. The Song of Songs offers

a marked contrast. It is not even merely a manual of teaching about sexuality, but a celebration of it.<sup>11</sup>

It has commonly not been read that way. In his book on the *Signs of Glory* in John's Gospel,<sup>12</sup> Richard Holloway notes how the first of these signs, at Cana, relates to two areas of life that easily go wrong, sex and drink. Enthusiasm for each can be a form of idolatry, because they offer ersatz versions of the love and joy that are to be found in God alone. The Church has therefore often attempted to outlaw both sex and drink, but when it has sought to do so, it has had difficulty in living with Scripture, either with a story about Jesus facilitating *drinking* at a *wedding* or with poems about sexual love, which it rendered harmless by means of typology and allegory. (I recently heard an allegorical exposition of the enthusiasm for strong drink and male make-up in Ps 104:15, too.)

The Song of Songs no doubt assumes a context in faith and morality; certainly this is the context in which it is set, by virtue of appearing in scripture. But it has little or no overt concern with ethics or religion; it does not talk about what you ought to do and it makes no mention of God. It does not mention marriage as the context of sexual activity, or children as its purpose, though again its context in scripture will imply that these are respectively its context and part of its purpose. But in itself the Song is a multi-faceted expression of the feelings of two people in love: enthusiasm, excitement, longing, happiness, wonder, fulfillment, acceptance, delight, anticipation, joy.

A "garden" is a key image in the poems (e.g., Song 4:12 – 5:1; 6:1-12). Karl Barth treated the Song of Songs as an extended commentary on Gen 2:18-25.<sup>13</sup> It is almost as if in their love the woman and the man recover Paradise lost. As Irving Berlin put it, "Heaven, I'm in heaven...." But only "almost." "In the Song, Paradise is limited by the fallen world; Death is undefeated, society imposes shame on the lovers, time inevitably separates them.... The ideal harmony of 'I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine' disappears on the last appearance of the formula: 'I am my beloved's and his desire is for me'" (Song 7:10, echoing Gen 3:16).<sup>14</sup> As the warnings of Proverbs are accompanied by some positive statements about sex, so the celebration of the Song is accompanied by indications that it has not surrendered to romanticism.

## 2 Models for Women and Men in Ministry in the First Testament?

"Models" here means not so much examples to follow as illustrations of people coping with questions and issues that may be like ours. Like us, they have to deal with the reality of ministering in a patriarchal society and of the need to find ways through that. Their way of doing so provides us with stories to set against our own experiences so that we can understand

<sup>11</sup> See further chapter 24 below.

<sup>12</sup> London: DLT, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> See *Church Dogmatics* iii/1 and 2 (Edinburgh: Clark, 1958 and 1960).

<sup>14</sup> Francis Landy, "The Song of Songs and the Garden of Eden," *JBL* 98 (1979): 513-28 (p. 524); see further Landy, *Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983).

our own experiences. They can then encourage us to dream of ways we might operate in our very different cultural context (they are inspired, and therefore inspiring). And they can function as checks on our dreams (they have the authority of the word of God).

First, there is Miriam and her little brothers. If it had not been for Miriam, there would have been no Moses, at least no Moses as the person he became (Exod 2:1-10). She is then the first Israelite to be called a prophet in scripture, leading in praise, music, dancing, and theological reflection. Was the song that Moses and the Israelites sang (Exod 15:1a) a song that Miriam actually composed (Exod 15:20-21)? If so, she has been marginalized in the story, but not squeezed out.

Miriam and Aaron's criticism of Moses for marrying an African (Num 12) may illustrate the tensions that can arise when men and women work together.<sup>15</sup> Marriage complicates ministry. The pastor's wife may come to have excessive significance in the ministry. Miriam (and Aaron) could feel crowded out, even if mistakenly. Miriam pays a price for that feeling, though Moses prays for her and she is healed.<sup>16</sup>

It would be nice to feel that if Moses had written the Pentateuch, he would have given more prominence to his sister....

Second, there is Deborah and Barak. Deborah is the first prophet in the promised land. It is as a prophet, too, that she leads in singing, intercession, and theological reflection (Judg 5). But before that she is Israel's greatest leader in the story from Joshua to Saul (Judg 4; English translations use the word "judge", but "leader" gives a better idea of that word's significance).

Deborah helped people make decisions about disputes in the community (Judg 4:5); she evidently had the kind of wisdom Solomon had, the discernment of good and evil (1 Kings 3:9). She commissioned Barak to go and take on the Canaanites, but he was unwilling to do so unless she came with him. She therefore agreed to do so but pointed out that a woman was therefore going to get the credit for how things turned out. Deborah (and Jael) evidently have more macho temperaments than Barak. As a man he prefers operating as number two to being number one. He likes the security of women's headship.

Then there is Isaiah, Ms Isaiah, Second Isaiah, and Ms Second Isaiah. While Mr Isaiah is eventually described as a prophet in the book called Isaiah (Isa 37:2; 38:1; 39:3), he does not call himself a prophet. The only person Mr Isaiah describes as a prophet is Ms Isaiah (Isa 8:3). Yet the only ministry we are told she exercises is having children. It turns out to be the means of bringing a powerful message (Isa 8:3-4).

A different ball game is played in Isa 40 - 55. Second Isaiah seems to be a man; at least he has a beard (Isa 50:6). But a woman's voice makes itself heard in Isa 40 - 55 more clearly than anywhere else in scripture. Second Isaiah speaks like someone who knows what it is like to be a wife, someone unable to have children, a mother, someone abandoned by her husband, a divorcée, and a widow, and also perhaps someone who has been

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<sup>15</sup> Admittedly the central issue in Num 12 is likely the relationship of Torah, prophecy, and priesthood, for which Moses, Miriam, and Aaron respectively stand.

<sup>16</sup> On this story, see Renita Weems, *Just A Sister Away* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988).

raped. Awareness of these experiences decisively shapes the way he thinks of God and God's relationship with the people, and the way he thinks of the people of God and their experience. Presumably no one woman has personally shared all these experiences with him, even Ms Second Isaiah, but he has apparently learned about them from her and from other women, and they have thus decisively shaped the theology of the chapters that many people see as the highpoint of the First Testament.

Fourth, there is Josiah, Hilkiah, Huldah, and Jeremiah. When King Josiah's workers find a Torah book behind the air-conditioning system while they are remodeling in the Temple, Josiah knows he had better ask prophetic advice about what to do in response to its scary contents. The person for whom Hilkiah and Josiah's aides make a beeline is Huldah (2 Kings 22). Were they scared to ask Jeremiah, who should have been available at the time? If so, they get more than they bargain for from Huldah. "Tell the man who sent you to me...": no exaggerated respect for manhood or monarchy here. Huldah tells it extremely straight to the king, but also promises that Yahweh has heard the way he responded when he read Yahweh's word.

Huldah promises Josiah that he will die in peace. It did not work out that way (1 Kings 23:29). Does he forfeit the right to claim this promise from his co-worker?

Finally, there is Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai. Mordecai is Esther's cousin, stepfather and mentor, but she has the position of influence at court because the king fancies her and makes her queen in place of the radical feminist Vashti who is too feisty for the king. Traditional roles are reversed as Mordecai passes on the gossip that Esther is in a position to do something about (Esther 2:22). He later urges her to take her life into her hands to do what in her position she can do, as he cannot, to save her people. This involves being involved in the politics of the court. Mordecai does the backroom work, fasting. She both fasts and does the frontline work.

At the close of the story Esther and Mordecai proclaim that Jewish people should henceforth observe the Feast of Purim, as they still do. Only Moses and Aaron have previously exercised such power. But it is Mordecai who ends up as second-in-command in the empire. Esther dominates the center of the story but is missing at its beginning and end.

### 3 Women and Men in the New Testament

The significance of sexuality is qualified in distinctive ways by the New Testament. At Cana, Jesus affirms marriage, but refuses to allow it to interfere with considerations of whether his time is yet come. He apparently remained celibate, as did Paul. The time being short, Paul rather wished that all believers could do so, though he recognizes this is unrealistic (1 Cor 7).

Given this position, it is striking to find Paul affirming the position of women here and elsewhere in 1 Corinthians. His views need to be understood against the background of the way the average pagan Corinthian saw women, and the way the Corinthian Christian women saw themselves.<sup>17</sup> In Greek cities generally, girls were mostly confined to the home, except for

<sup>17</sup> What follows is largely dependent on R. J. Banks, "Paul and Women's Liberation," *Interchange* 18 (Sydney: AFES, 1976): 81-105; cf. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1980), pp.113-31.

occasions such as festivals and funerals. Women were not expected to be educated. They might learn to read and write and to cook and sew, but they were not expected to be able to appreciate intellectual matters or serious conversation. Married women were regarded as inferior to their husbands; their place was in the home looking after the house and raising the family. They could go to the theatre, but took no part in intellectual, political or civil life. A man's serious personal relationships would be with other men, not with his wife. Intellectual writers addressed their teaching to other men. A woman had no legal status separate from her husband's; she was part of his property. He had no obligation to be faithful to her, though indiscretion on her part could lead to divorce, whereas it was much harder for her to get a divorce from him.

The women believers at Corinth were released from the conventions, standards and values of this age, and called to witness to those of the age to come. Many of the activities Paul condemns among the Corinthians likely reflect their understanding of their Christian freedom. Sexuality was one area this affected. Man and woman are one by creation (Gen 1 – 2) and one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28); as the Corinthians apparently put it, "everyone has Christ for his [or her] head" (1 Cor 11:13); Paul seems to be quoting the Corinthians' own catchphrase, both to affirm and to qualify it. In light of this, why keep distinctions such as the way you wear your hair? Why not let your hair down? Why should a man not be free to have a perm or a woman to have a crew cut if they feel like it? Why keep to arbitrary conventions? (It is likely that neither hats nor veils are the issue in 1 Cor 11; more likely the whole chapter is about coiffure. But the main point is not affected by this question.)

In responding to the Corinthians' excesses, Paul does not go back on "all are one in Christ Jesus." He shows himself as interested in teaching wives as husbands (see 1 Cor 7). Both are morally responsible. They are on equal footing regarding sexual gratification. The wife has authority over her husband as well as vice versa (1 Cor 7:4). Ephesians 5 works in a parallel way. Wives are to defer to their husbands; but this exhortation comes in the context of a command to all believers to defer to one another, a command that does not imply the one to be deferred to has the right or responsibility to give the orders. The implications of the command are rather exemplified in what follows in the exhortation. Their implication for husbands is more demanding than it is for wives: their headship implies not that they make the decisions, but that they make the sacrifices. It is husbands who have to walk the self-denying way of the cross. And the submission of their wives lies in their letting them do so.

In 1 Cor 16, Paul speaks of Aquila and Priscilla together having a congregation meeting in *their* house (it was hardly *their* house legally); both are Paul's colleagues in Acts, Priscilla often being named first. In 1 Cor 11, Paul assumes that in church it is normal for women to take part in prayer and prophecy, which would likely be seen as the two most important activities that happened there. There is thus apparently no difference in the roles women and men play in worship. Yet outward differences between them are to be preserved. All are one and all are equal, but all are not identical. Paul takes up the point fundamental to Gen 2 itself, that men and women were created different. The talk about "headship" underlines this

point; “head of” in Greek as much suggests “origin of” as “master of.” Man and woman are of different origin, and that is a parable of their different nature, to be preserved by differences of appearance. Paul’s view contrasts with the one that asserts that men and women are really the same, apart from certain superficial physical differences. He does not pronounce on what these differences are; he simply invites us not to lose sight of them. They are one aspect of the diversity of humanity that is part of the way God has made it.

First Timothy 2 takes a contrary view of the involvement of men and women in leading worship, and compares with the fact that all Jesus’ Twelve Disciples were men. The difference is often taken to imply that 1 Timothy is by someone other than Paul, though this does not solve the question of the theological relationship between the passages. First Timothy embodies an alternative way of responding to a tricky situation similar to that at Corinth, though perhaps more severe. The Pastoral Epistles indicate in various ways a need in the churches addressed to cope with difficult pastoral problems by firm leadership and affirmation of the church’s tradition, and the attitude to the position of women belongs in this context. The way Genesis is used to support the positions taken, like much other use of Scripture in the New Testament, follows conventional contemporary forms of argument rather than reflecting the meaning of Genesis itself, but this does not make 1 Timothy unfaithful to the First Testament, for a similar stance to the one taken in 1 Timothy sometimes appears in the First Testament (even if it is not in Gen 1 – 3). Both Testaments offer creation- and redemption-visions of what it means to be a man and a woman; both also implicitly recognize the difficulty of living by those visions. Both offer paradigms of believers trying to live in the light of these visions, yet to live realistically in a wayward world.